





ART. XII.—*Archæological Work about Khotan.* By M. A. STEIN, Ph.D., M.R.A.S.

EVER since an accidental discovery, some thirty-five years ago, at Yōtkan, a village of the Borazān tract, disclosed remains of the ancient capital of Khotan, the layers of its *débris*, deeply buried under alluvial soil, have been regularly mined and washed for 'treasure' by the villagers. The great mass of the highly interesting finds of ancient art pottery, engraved stones, and early Khotan coins with Kharoṣṭhī-Chinese legends, which have recently been so thoroughly examined in Dr. Hoernle's report on the "British Collection of Central-Asian Antiquities," has come from this site. The detailed examination of the great excavations made in the course of the treasure-seeking operations furnished interesting evidence as to the way in which those remains are embedded in layers of decomposed rubbish, evidently the accumulations of centuries. It also showed conclusively that the layer of earth (loess), from 9 to 20 feet deep at various points, which covers these 'culture-strata,' is due solely to silt deposit, the necessary result of intensive irrigation, and not to any great flood or similar catastrophe such as has been assumed by some earlier visitors of the site.

Sun-dried bricks and clay were undoubtedly in ancient times, just as now, the most conveniently available building materials of the country about Khotan. They account for the striking absence at Yōtkan and other old sites of the oasis of more conspicuous or solid remains. In order to extract coins, pottery fragments, gems, etc., it is necessary to wash the soil just as it is done for the tiny pieces of leaf-gold which form the main proceeds of the villagers' diggings. The late Autumn and Winter, when the irrigation

channels contain no water or else are frozen, is obviously not the season for such operations. But I was able to acquire on the spot enough of the last Summer's output, and thus to form a fairly exact idea of the remains which the parts of the site not yet exploited are likely to contain.

The tenacity of local worship has proved in Khotan quite as helpful for my enquiries into questions of ancient topography as it has in Kashmir. The sacred sites of Buddhist Khotan which Hiuen Tsiang and Fa-hian describe can be shown to be occupied now, almost without exception, by Muhammadan shrines forming the object of popular pilgrimages. The introduction of Islām, close on nine hundred years ago, has evidently affected local worship as little as it has the general character and ways of the people of Khōtan. In this marked constancy of ethnic characteristics, too, Khotan curiously resembles Kashmir, from which it probably received much of its early Indian culture.

By the end of November the small parties of professional treasure-seekers whom I had previously despatched on reconnaissances to various old sites in the Taklamakān desert, to the north-east of Khotan, returned with their spoil. The specimens of antiques thus secured induced me to select a locality known to that fraternity by the name of Dandān-Uiliq for my first explorations in that direction. After making the arrangements necessary for a longer journey into the desert I started from Khotan in the first week of December and reached Dandān - Uiliq by nine marches. It proved identical with the site which Dr. Sven Hedin had seen on his memorable march to the Keriya Daryā, and which is spoken of in the narrative of his travels as "the ancient city Taklamakan."

Dandān-Uiliq, situated *circa* $81^{\circ} 2' 50''$ long., $37^{\circ} 49' 10''$ lat., is separated from Tawakkel, the nearest inhabited place of the Khotan oasis, by about 45 miles of desert covered with moving sands. Though the question of transport and supplies presented some difficulty, the effective help of the Amban of Khotan enabled me to bring to the place, and

to keep there at work, a sufficient party of labourers for purposes of excavations.

The remains of Dandān-Uiliq consist of small groups of half-ruined buildings, partially buried under low sand-dunes and scattered over an area about two miles long from north to south and three-quarters of a mile broad. Though the site can only be that of a cluster of villages, or rather hamlets, the excavations carried on by me during a stay of eighteen days have yielded very interesting antiquarian results. Among the ruins at present partly exposed by the sand I found half-a-dozen Buddhist shrines, and the exploration of these has proved particularly fruitful. They consist invariably of a small square cella enclosed by a quadrangular passage, while at a short distance are found dwelling-places of varying size which must have served for the accommodation of the attending Bhikṣus. The walls show uniformly a framework of wooden posts and beams, the interstices being filled by a kind of strong and closely packed reed matting to which thick and remarkably hard layers of plaster are applied on either side. On the carefully stuccoed walls of the cellas and their enclosing passages, paintings, more or less well preserved, representing objects and scenes of Buddhist worship, came to light. The large-sized statues and relievos, modelled in stucco and coloured, which originally occupied the cellas, have suffered far more. But enough remains to show the high technical development and thoroughly Indian type of sculptural art as practised in these Buddhist establishments of old Khotan. Small relievo images representing Buddhas, Gandharvas, etc., and probably used in the decoration of the upper portions of the walls now destroyed, turned up in plenty. Equally interesting for the history of Indian art in Central Asia are the numerous wooden tablets with elaborate pictures of Buddhist saints and gods, which were found around the pedestals of the principal statues just as they were originally deposited by the worshippers.

Some of the mural paintings bear short inscriptions in that variety of Indian script which has been designated

by Dr. Hoernle, its first decipherer, as Central Asian Brāhmī. But far more numerous and important are the finds of manuscript material which have rewarded the excavation of the dwelling-places attached to the shrines. The manuscripts that have come to light there are all written, after the fashion of Indian *pōthīs*, on detached leaves of paper, a circumstance which largely accounts for their fragmentary condition. They are all written in Central Asian Brāhmī, with variations in the form of the script which indicate considerable differences of age. The majority of the texts are in Sanskrit and seem to treat of subjects connected with the Buddhist canon. Others, however, though written in Indian characters, present us with specimens of a non-Indian language, in which we may suspect with some reason the tongue indigenous to the country, perhaps an early form of Turkī. Judging from such palaeographical indications as a necessarily hurried examination has so far permitted me to observe, the manuscripts appear to range in date approximately from the fifth to the eighth century of our era.

In addition to these manuscript finds a considerable number of papers have been unearthed which, from their general appearance, may be assumed with great probability to contain memoranda and correspondence. They are written partly in very cursive Central Asian Brāhmī characters and in the non-Sanskritic language already referred to, and partly in Chinese. The latter documents, I hope, will, when examined by competent Chinese scholars, prove specially useful by furnishing dates and other particulars of historical interest. I cannot detail here other curious objects that came to light from the sand-filled dwellings of Dandān-Uiliq. But I may briefly point out that the manuscript finds described possess an additional value apart from their intrinsic philological or palaeographical interest. They are the first finds of this kind in Central Asia of which the place and circumstances of discovery have been authentically recorded. The observations made in connection with them are likely to throw fresh light

on important earlier finds which have reached European collections from Chinese Turkestan, and they will also enable us to scrutinize more closely certain other and more recent acquisitions, about the genuineness of which grave suspicion seems justified.

It was no easy task to extract the epigraphical relics of Dandān-Uiliq from their resting-places without injury. The paper of the manuscripts has become exceedingly brittle through the very dryness of the desert sand which has helped to preserve them. Still more difficult was it to unfold and clean the leaves with half-benumbed fingers. The Winter of the desert is truly Sarmatic. During my stay at Dandān-Uiliq the temperature at night usually fell to somewhere about 10° F. below zero; in the daytime it never rose above freezing-point in the shade. Fortunately the trunks of dead trees, which still rise, shrivelled and gaunt, between the sand-dunes from what were once gardens and groves, supplied fuel in plenty.

Until all the documents recovered at Dandān-Uiliq have been thoroughly examined it is impossible to indicate with certainty the time when the site was finally abandoned. But I think there is enough evidence to show that the place was deserted before Muhammadanism was established in Khotan. The survey of the surrounding desert track has furnished no proof of the supposed great change in the course of the Keriya River with which the abandonment of Dandān-Uiliq could be connected; nor will it be easy to account for the comparative preservation of its ruins while so many other old sites in and along the desert are now marked only by thin layers of pottery fragments, until the peculiar conditions of the moving sands in this whole region have been observed more closely and for a prolonged period. It will be a somewhat trying task for a future scientist. This 'ocean of sand' is truly forbidding even in the depth of Winter, and must be an inferno during the period of the great sand-storms and the terrible Summer heat.

I have now reached inhabited ground again at Keriya, from where I propose to march eastwards to Niya in order

to explore various old localities reported to me in that neighbourhood. Here, as in Khotan and elsewhere, I am offered every assistance by the local Chinese authorities. I must appreciate their good offices and their readiness to further my labours all the more at a time when full knowledge of the great troubles eastwards must have reached even this distant corner of the empire.

